



# The Freedom TO LEARN

**Contraband** means smuggled goods. During the Civil War, it was a term used to describe an escaped slave behind Union lines.

Whenever Union soldiers from the North marched into one of the Confederate states in the South and claimed territory, slaves ran to them for protection from Southern slave owners. Considered **contraband**, they often lived in little towns called “contraband camps.” These camps usually were found near where the Union army had set up its tents.

The former slaves lived in old packing crates, sod huts, and—if they were lucky—abandoned houses. One room might hold as many as six families. Children, like their parents, worked very hard. They planted and harvested crops, worked as servants to soldiers, or took care of younger brothers and sisters. It was a rough introduction to freedom.

But most black children did manage to spend at least part of their time in school. Some worked in the morning and attended class in the

afternoon. Young babysitters brought their infant and toddler siblings with them to school, letting them nap on the porch while the older brothers and sisters studied inside.

Some schools were very small, like the one organized for several little black girls by the nine-year-old daughter of a Union army surgeon in Corinth, Mississippi. Others were quite large. For instance, fourteen hundred African American students attended public schools run by the Union army in New Orleans. And a woman named Lucy Chase opened a school in Richmond’s (Virginia) First African Church that had more than one thousand students!

Some teachers were African Americans, and some were former slaves. In 1861, Mary Smith Peake organized the first school opened by the American Missionary Association in Norfolk, Virginia. Peake was a black woman whose school eventually became the

Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). Many nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black leaders, such as Booker T. Washington, were educated there.

The subjects learned by these newly freed children were often the same as those studied by white children in the North: reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. They used textbooks written just for them with names like *The Freedman's Spelling Book*.

Most ex-slave children were very serious about their studies, although sometimes they were mischievous. In one

school, the students confused their teacher by trading names or making up new ones every week. One student even called himself Stonewall Jackson, after the famous Confederate general.

But education was clearly very important to the freed children who were lucky enough to attend school. This was proven to one Northern teacher when she asked a group of girls, "What good does it do you to come to school?" One of them replied, "If we are educated, they can't make slaves of us again."

**Adapted from an article  
by James Marten**

*At schools for freed slaves, such as this one in Vicksburg, Mississippi, children learned how to read and write alongside adults.*

